

DNREC's Division of Fish & Wildlife announces rare event involving loggerhead sea turtles hatching at Fenwick Island State Park

FENWICK ISLAND – DNREC's Division of Fish & Wildlife announced today that 48 loggerhead sea turtle hatchlings recently emerged from a nest at Fenwick Island State Park. Announcement of the successful nest and staggered egg hatching was delayed until after an assessment of the status of all the eggs in the nest. The loggerhead sea turtle is a federally-listed threatened species and a state-listed endangered species in Delaware.



A loggerhead hatchling begins its life at sea from Delaware's shore.
Photo: Keith Betts

Images captured from a remote camera indicated that many of the hatchlings emerged from the nest late one night and made their way to the ocean in September. Nest monitors from DNREC's partner, the Marine Education, Research & Rehabilitation Institute (MERR), arrived early the next morning to find a single turtle wandering near the nest, with 12 more hatchlings later found stuck on or disoriented near the dune due to a storm the night before. Those turtles were placed near the water by Division of Fish & Wildlife biologists to help the turtles start their life at sea. Later that same week, another seven hatchlings emerged and made their way to the ocean after sunset. An additional five hatchlings emerged over the next several days, making their way to the ocean. Finally, a single hatchling's tracks to the ocean were observed one morning in late September. A nest inventory in October revealed that 49 of the 78 eggs had hatched. One of the hatchlings died in the nest cavity, a common occurrence with sea turtle nests.

The original nest was dug and eggs laid below the high tide line in the Town of Fenwick near James Street, which would have likely ended in nest failure, resulting in a decision to relocate the nest. Under guidance of DNREC's Division of Fish & Wildlife, the nest was moved the same day by MERR volunteers to a more remote and higher location at Fenwick Island State Park to ensure the safety of the eggs. DNREC's divisions of Fish & Wildlife, Parks & Recreation, and Watershed Stewardship worked together to erect predator fencing to protect the nest until the hatchlings emerged. Additionally, Division of Fish & Wildlife staff and MERR volunteers monitored and protected the nest throughout the anticipated hatch period.

On the East Coast, loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*) typically nest on sandy beaches from North Carolina to Florida. It is rare for them to nest north of Virginia, and an extremely rare event for Delaware. This is the first documented loggerhead sea turtle nest in Delaware since July 1973, when a nest was

found in north Bethany. Assateague Island National Seashore in Maryland experienced its first successful loggerhead hatch in 2017 after past multiple nesting attempts had failed.

For more information about loggerhead sea turtles or this nesting event, please contact Wildlife Biologist Jason Davis, with the Division of Fish & Wildlife's Species Conservation and Research Program, at 302-735-3600.

- *Follow the Division of Fish & Wildlife on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/DelawareFishWildlife>.*

Media contact: Joanna Wilson, DNREC Public Affairs, 302-739-9902

Vol. 48, No. 292